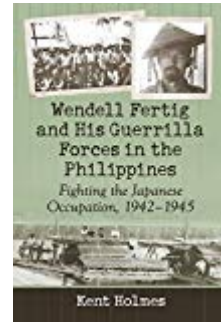


**Kent Holmes.** *Wendell Fertig and His Guerrilla Forces in the Philippines: Fighting the Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945.* Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015. 244 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-9825-3.



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Mindanao has been notoriously problematic for conquering armies. The island sprawls over nearly one hundred thousand square kilometers, and until well into the twentieth century much of its interior remained uncharted. In addition to considerable environmental impediments, Mindanao and the adjacent Sulu Archipelago were (and still are) home to dynamic Islamic societies that staunchly resisted colonial incursion. The Spanish conquest of the Philippines in the sixteenth century led to the subjugation and Christianization of Luzon and the Visayas, yet in the southern Philippines the Iberian colonizers were only able to establish a fragmentary series of forts and trading posts along Mindanao's littoral. Jesuit conversion efforts were violently opposed by Muslims—called “Moros” by the Spanish—whose memories of the *Reconquista* were still fresh.[1] Long stretches of tense détente between Moro societies and the Spanish were punctuated by eruptions of violence, as one *gobernador-general* or another decided that the moment was right to dominate and convert the natives.[2] The Sulu and Maguindanao sultanates participated in the vigorous maritime economy of Southeast Asia, tapping into the trade networks of China, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and North Borneo. It was not until the late nineteenth century that the Spanish, through the use of mod-

ern naval technology, were able to effectively dominate the Sulu Archipelago. The coastal sultanates became unanchored from traditional revenue streams as colonial spatial orders in the region were entrenched, redefining acceptable commercial practices and suppressing mobility.[3]

The United States, acquiring Mindanao and Sulu in the wake of the Spanish-American War, encountered a region unlike Christianized Luzon or Visayas. At the time of transfer, Spanish military and political power barely extended beyond population centers like Zamboanga, Jolo, and Cotabato. More important, the Moros and pagans of Mindanao and Sulu had not experienced the dizzying cultural impacts of colonial control. While there were a handful of Moros who had embraced Spanish culture, the vast majority continued to be educated by local *panditas* (religious figures), looked to their village *datu* (tribal chief) for justice, and embraced the syncretic Malay-Islamic traditions their ancestors had. In an effort to avoid conflicts in the southern Philippines while battles with insurgents raged in the North, the Americans made treaties with some *datos* and sultans in the early years of the occupation, and otherwise left restive Moro populations alone. This changed in 1902-1903, when the young Captain John Pershing led a series of punitive ex-

peditions to crush resistant Maranao Moros around Lake Lanao in the interior of Mindanao. The Lanao campaigns were followed by the abnegation of the Bates Treaty in the Sulu Archipelago and anti-outlaw expeditions there. In Maguindanao (now renamed Cotabato after its primary town), the anticolonial leader Datu Ali was tracked and killed with the help of Moro collaborators after he resisted American colonial prerogatives. Asymmetrical violence on the part of the military authorities occurred sporadically, including a massacre on the island of Jolo where between seven hundred and nine hundred Tausūg Moros were slaughtered. Meanwhile, the military government of what was known as the Moro Province undertook a variety of educational, commercial, and agricultural schemes in order to transform Muslim and pagan populations into ideal colonial subjects.[4]

Reliance on a mixture of force and cultural coercion continued after the end of military rule in 1913, when civilian officials replaced army officers in governmental roles and the Philippine constabulary took on the role of enforcer in the southern Philippines. In the 1920s and 1930s, the island of Mindanao became enshrined in the Filipino national imagination as a space of untapped potential. Settlers from the North, with government encouragement, began colonizing the island in greater numbers, and Manila newspapers spoke of vast infrastructural projects that would modernize the wilds of Mindanao and connect it to the rest of the nation. Christian Filipinos progressively assumed leadership positions in the southern Philippines, although some Americans remained in key roles there until the outbreak of war. Muslim populations in Mindanao and Sulu resented Christian Filipino control, sporadically resisting governmental imperatives by attacking local authorities (Filipino schoolteachers were a favored target) and clashing with the Philippine constabulary. As they saw it, Christian Filipino domination represented a new colonial threat. Adding to tensions was Japanese migration to Mindanao and Japanese migrants' preponderant role in the hemp trade. In the lead-up to the Second World War, the southern Philippines was a fractious space.[5]

The above is the historical backdrop against which Kent Holmes's book is set. We shall get to its relevance shortly. *Wendell Fertig and His Guerilla Forces in the Philippines: Fighting the Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945* focuses primarily on the efforts of American and Christian Filipino guerrilla forces to wage a sustained low-intensity conflict against the Japanese military in and around Mindanao during the Second World War. The titular character in Holmes's work, Wendell Welby Fertig,

was a mining engineer from Colorado who relocated to the Philippines in 1936 and worked as a consultant for a number of firms in Samar and Batangas. A reservist in the Army Corps of Engineers, Fertig was called to active duty in mid-1941 and assisted in the defense and evacuation of Bataan and Corregidor. Flown out of Corregidor before it fell, Fertig landed in Mindanao. Rather than continuing on to Australia, where General Douglas MacArthur was establishing his General Headquarters (GHQ), Fertig accepted an offer from Major General William Sharp, head of the Visayan-Mindanao Force, to serve as head of engineering. Preparing for the Japanese arrival, Fertig directed the demolition of bridges, roads, and other valuable public infrastructure around Dansalan and Iligan in northern Mindanao. Japanese forces landed in northern Mindanao in early May 1942 and Fertig took to the hills, hiding out in the camp of former soldier and old Mindanao hand Jacob Deisher along the Lanao-Bukidnon border. After witnessing American prisoners of war being marched along the highway between Dansalan and Iligan in July, Fertig decided to confront the Japanese occupation. He linked up with a constabulary officer named Luis Morgan who led a small force of men and agreed to lead them in military operations against the Japanese. Morgan, himself the product of a mixed Filipino-American marriage, realized that having a US Army officer heading the guerrilla force would mean better access to outside support.

The bulk of *Wendell Fertig and His Guerilla Forces in the Philippines* is a thematically structured account of Fertig's organization. Chapter 3 focuses on the development of the Mindanao guerillas, including Fertig's efforts to gain the support of Filipino elites and the Catholic Church in Misamis, and his attempts to revive civil government and local businesses after Misamis City fell to the guerillas. Chapter 4 explores early frustrations maintaining contact with GHQ in Australia and the eventual development of Force Radio Command, a series of covert radio stations that provided important naval intelligence through their observation of the coasts. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the scope and tactics of both Japanese and guerilla forces in Mindanao. Holmes estimates the guerillas had a pool of thirty-six thousand men to draw from on the island and highlights the roles played by non-Americans in the organization, including Australian soldiers, a Syrian engineer, and a German soldier of fortune. The second half of chapter 6 is a breakdown of the structure of the guerilla army and brief descriptions of the significant battles they fought in between 1943 and 1945. A brief but charming section highlights the eclectic boats

of the “Guerilla Navy,” one of which managed to shoot down a low-flying Japanese bomber. Chapter 7 is about logistical support and intelligence collection, in particular the SPYRON submarine resupply missions coordinated by Chick Parsons. Chapter 8 highlights the importance of Fertig’s organization in providing information on the movements of Japanese ships, airfield activity, road traffic, troop strength, bomb assessments, and other actionable intelligence. Holmes concludes the book with a three-chapter assessment of Fertig’s leadership abilities and a reflection on guerilla warfare. While acknowledging some of the criticisms made by subordinates in the postwar era, Holmes concludes that Fertig managed to solve the “Moro Problem,” keep his organization free from corruption, and run the most efficient guerilla force in the southern Philippines.

The book is strongest when it is describing the logistics of running a covert operation, something that is perhaps attributable to the author’s career in the Central Intelligence Agency. Military detail—divisional organization, troop strength, types of equipment, intelligence-gathering techniques—is Holmes’s obvious forte, and those seeking a practical breakdown of the composition and activities of the guerilla movement in Mindanao should seek out this volume. Additionally, the sections that describe the intricacies of creating a unified military organization from a patchwork of disparate, oft-feuding groups (Americans, Filipinos, Moros) is well composed, as are the personal biographies of many of the men who served as officers under Fertig. Perhaps the most interesting chapters of the book come near its conclusion, when Holmes moves away from military analysis and provides his own reflections of Fertig’s legacy. As the account makes clear, Fertig often faced difficulties when dealing with his subordinates. In particular, he clashed with Clive Childress and Ernest McClish, two of his division heads. Decades later, Childress published a scathing critique of Fertig’s performance as a commander. An early decision to feign being a general officer sent from Australia to unite the guerrilla forces was questioned by many, and some of Fertig’s subordinates resented that a reservist was in overall command of operations in Mindanao. Quoting liberally from the accounts by Fertig and others, Holmes illustrates well the complications of leadership.

We must return, however, to the state of Mindanao entering the Second World War. The book missteps in its failure to explore how guerilla activities of the Second World War were shaped by the regional history of the southern Philippines. Muslim problems with Filipino

land ownership in Mindanao, for example, are brushed off in a couple sentences as illegitimate examples of sellers’ remorse. This reduces what remains an ineffably complex issue of land, culture, and displacement to mere bitterness and vendetta. The history of American colonialism in Mindanao and Sulu is only given a few paragraphs and described in uniformly glowing terms. As illustrated by Moshe Yegar and others, the transition to private property among cultures with familial and communal notions of land ownership was anything but smooth. Compounding this were the beginnings of a demographic sea change on the island that began in the prewar years. Encouraged by Christian Filipino politicians in the North, hundreds of thousands (and, after the war, millions) of settlers came to Mindanao.[6] Various groups of Moros thus responded in a number of ways to the coming of the Japanese—some saw it as an opportunity to reverse increasing Christian dominance in the southern Philippines, others remained loyal to the Americans in hopes of better results after the war, and many simply recused themselves entirely from the conflict. Although briefly mentioning Fertig’s negotiations with the Lanao Moros, Holmes overlooks the literature that examines Muslim agency in Mindanao and Sulu during the Japanese occupation.[7] At the time of the Japanese invasion, the peoples of the southern Philippines were experiencing the turbulence of becoming minorities within a national body where their avenues to power were severely circumscribed. One cannot fathom their actions during the Second World War without studying this phenomenon.

Furthermore, Holmes’s approach to American-Filipino relations within Fertig’s organization is problematic. In describing the falling out that occurred between Fertig and his chief of staff Luis Morgan—responsible for assembling the beginnings of what became Fertig’s organization—Holmes shrugs off Morgan’s complaints against his commander as “largely anti-American and petty personal insults” (pp. 164-165). In fact, if we parse Morgan’s letter to Fertig through the lens of the colonial racial hierarchies still at play in the Philippines, we see that Morgan was upset because he, as a mestizo, was passed over for the best supplies in favor of white Americans, some of whom were subordinates. One can see how Holmes interprets this as “petty,” yet seen through the prism of race the matter is far more nebulous. In the Philippines of the American colonial period, white men who took Filipino women as girlfriends or wives (or, more rarely, white women who took Filipino men as boyfriends or husbands) were ostracized and the

children resulting from these couplings were often unwelcome in white colonial society. Memoirs from the southern Philippines in the 1920s and 1930s attest to this phenomenon, as does the broader literature on colonial métissage.[8] The “petty” complaints of Morgan may have been just that, but they are also suggestive of the lingering racial dynamics of a colonial state in which white Anglo-Saxons were thought to be most capable and thus reaped the rewards.

The men surrounding Fertig who had lived in the Philippines prior to the war give the most tangible connections between the guerillas and the history of Mindanao and Sulu. Frederick Worcester, Fertig’s first intelligence officer, receives only passing mention. Yet he was the son of the famous zoologist-turned-Philippines specialist Dean Worcester, a man who sat on the Philippine Commission and headed the Department of the Interior in Manila for years afterward. An “expert” on the non-Christian peoples of the Philippines, Dean Worcester had a substantial impact on shaping American policies and cultural dispositions toward the Moros and pagans of Mindanao. After his death in the 1920s, Worcester’s wife and children remained in the Philippines and were treated as colonial royalty in Zamboanga.[9] One cannot help but wonder what sort of cultural knowledge Frederick Worcester brought to the guerrillas during his brief stint as intelligence officer. The same could be said about Jacob Deisher, the ex-soldier who had served during the Philippine-American War and remained behind to make his fortunes afterward. His experiences during the Japanese occupation, collected in the Deisher-Couch Papers at the United States Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, would have aided Holmes’s work.[10]

Other issues are more structural in nature. Digressions on MacArthur’s escape from the Philippines and the Battle of Leyte tangentially relate to the experiences of Fertig and his men but do not serve Holmes’s story well, taking the reader away from the guerillas and their struggles. At times the narrative becomes mechanistic and devolves into long lists of dispatches or supply runs. Such material functions best when it is worked into the text and cited fully in appendices. That said, parts of Holmes’s story read wonderfully, such as when he is recounting the travails of the Davao Penal Colony escapees or the battlefield stories of the Hansen brothers. It is evident that Holmes, who shares a familial connection to the Mindanao guerillas, invested a great deal of care in assembling this information and correcting mistakes found in other material on Fertig.[11]

*Wendell and His Guerilla Forces in the Philippines* is appropriate for general and specialist readers and provides a wealth of information on how Americans and others creatively responded to a situation where they were outmanned and outgunned. It is written in the style of an old-school military history, with great attention paid to matters of organization, technology, intelligence, and communications. Outside of this, however, are some useful reflections on the challenges of assembling and leading an unconventional military force, as well as a commentary on the legacy of Fertig’s organization in American approaches to covert operations. Nevertheless, the book misses an opportunity to provide readers with a more nuanced history of Mindanao and Sulu during the Second World War. In treating the American colonial experience in the Philippines as peripheral, Holmes fails to assess the strategies of collaboration, resistance, and passivity enacted by national minorities caught amid larger struggles, and how these phenomena reverberated in guerilla operations. The topic of race and its role in shaping interactivities between Americans, Filipinos, Japanese, Moros, and pagans is also notable in its absence. As John W. Dower famously demonstrated, notions of race and empire were omnipresent in the Pacific theater.[12] The southern Philippines in 1942 was a contentious and complex region, shaped by successive colonial encounters, and the arrival of the Japanese deepened this complexity. Holmes’s book is a welcome addition to the literature on Mindanao in the twentieth century, but one hopes that future accounts situate the wartime careers of men like Fertig within deeper histories of colonial empire, racial order, and spatial reconfiguration.

#### Notes

[1]. The term “Moro” has a tumultuous history, and some still consider it an unpleasant colonial byproduct. In recent decades, political and guerrilla groups in the Philippines have reappropriated the word and have used it to denote the entire body of Muslims in the country. I use it in this same spirit of inclusiveness and where appropriate acknowledge the important ethnic subdivisions found among the Muslims of the southern Philippines.

[2]. Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002), 199-212; and Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, *Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Educational Policy: Schooling and Ethno-Religious Conflict in the Southern Philippines* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

2005), 19-44.

[3]. Patricio Abinales, "From *Orang Besar* to Colonial Big Man: Datu Piang of Cotabato and the American Colonial State," in *Lives at the Margin: Biography of Filipinos Obscure, Ordinary, and Heroic*, ed. Alfred W. McCoy (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), 193-210.

[4]. Robert Fulton, *Honor for the Flag: The Battle of Bud Dajo 1906 and the Moro Massacre* (Bend, OR: Tumalo Creek Press, 2011), 95-158; Joshua Gedacht, "'Mohammedan Religion Made It Necessary to Fire': Massacres on the American Imperial Frontier from South Dakota to the Southern Philippines," in *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, ed. Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 397-409; and Milligan, *Islamic Identity*, 45-84.

[5]. Patricio Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation-State* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2004), 45-93.

[6]. Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 223-225.

[7]. Midori Kawashima, "The Battle of Tamparan: A Maranao Response to the Japanese Occupation of Mindanao," in *Southeast Asian Minorities in the Wartime Japanese Empire*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 223-243; and Ralph B. Thomas, "'Asia for Asiatics?': Muslim Filipino Responses to Japanese Occupation and Propaganda during World War II," *Dansalan Research Center Occasional Papers* 7 (May 1977): 1-32.

[8]. On racial dynamics in the prewar southern Philippines, see Vic Hurley, *Southeast of Zamboanga*

(New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1935), 32-34; and Charles Ivins, "The Monkeys Have No Tails in Zamboanga," unpublished memoirs of Charles Ivins, box 1, Charles F. Ivins Papers, 1933-1934, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Fears of intimacy and racial transgression were omnipresent in the American colonial sphere. See, for example, Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

[9]. On Worcester and his family in the Philippines, see Rodney J. Sullivan, *Exemplar of Americanism: The Philippine Career of Dean C. Worcester* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991). Charles Ivins commented specifically on Frederick Worcester in Zamboanga in his unpublished memoirs, "The Monkeys Have No Tails in Zamboanga," cited above. In addition, Frederick's papers, including his not so flattering opinions about Fertig, are available at the MacArthur Memorial Library and Archives in Norfolk, Virginia.

[10]. The Deisher-Couch Papers, 1898-1972, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

[11]. Holmes's book is written as something of a corrective to the semi-fictionalized account of Fertig's exploits in Mindanao. See John Keats, *They Fought Alone* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1963). Virginia Hansen Holmes, wife of the author, wrote a book about her family's experiences in Mindanao during the Second World War. See Virginia Hansen Holmes, *Guerilla Daughter* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009).

[12]. John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 3-15.

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